



Success Snapshot for Media

## **San Jose Speeds the Solar Permitting Process**

One of the lessons learned through the U.S. Department of Energy's Solar America Cities program is that solar permitting, as it stands today, can prove to be a significant barrier to greater solar energy adoption. Many city and county offices find themselves awash in a sea of paperwork, often understaffed and unsure about how to regulate solar system installations. Staff in local permitting offices are grappling with not only resource issues, but cumbersome, often antiquated permitting procedures. In some cases, lines of jurisdiction are blurred and it is unclear which permitting procedures should be followed as applications for solar installation permits are assessed.

While permitting procedures may not at first blush seem to be an area for innovation, the reality is that improving local understanding around solar permitting – and ultimately speeding the solar permitting process – can greatly impact how seriously residents and businesses move forward on solar installations, and can drive the total cost of solar projects down significantly. Improving the clarity of local regulations, removing jurisdictional conflicts, training staff appropriately and speeding the permitting process should be goals of every city seeking to increase its solar energy use.

The City of San Jose, California, one of the Department of Energy's 25 Solar America Cities, has been at the forefront of addressing this problem – and is now serving as a powerful example for other cities across the nation. According to Jessie Denver, the city's Solar Program Coordinator, "One of the biggest pieces of advice we have to offer other cities interested in advancing solar is to work on streamlining permitting processes."

The City of San Jose's Building Department has been a driving force promoting safe and compliant installation of renewable energy for over nine years. The city has committed time and financial resources to educate City staff and installers, streamline the solar permitting process and address safety concerns in photovoltaic (PV) system design and installation. To date, the department has been successful in reducing solar permit costs, providing over-the-counter services for residential solar projects, conducting inspections within 24 hours of request, reaching out to installers to provide training and information, training field staff, and maintaining consistent enforcement throughout the City of San Jose.

According to Denver, the result of these changes in San Jose's system has had a significant impact. Says Denver, "Our focus on giving the community easy access to solar has resulted in over 14 megawatts of installed PV capacity in the residential and commercial sectors. We would not be able to claim the number of installations we've seen without the time and effort we invested into improving our permitting process."

Since revamping their solar permitting process, San Jose has been tapped to share lessons with other cities across the United States as well.



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- In December 2008, the City worked in collaboration with industry group SolarTech to host a Renewable Energy Permitting Symposium that engaged over 100 municipal building code and permitting officials, political leaders and solar industry representatives in charting the course for the development of standardized best practices for solar permitting and installation.
- In March 2009, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Solar America Cities meeting in San Antonio, Texas, city staff directly involved in the San Jose Solar Program shared their experience and program results with the other 24 Solar America Cities. In addition, SolarTech's Acting Executive Director, Doug Payne, who has worked with the City of San Jose on events and training, shared extensive lessons on achieving cost-savings through regional coordination of permitting practices.
- In late 2009, the City of San Jose partnered again with SolarTech and Solar America City San Francisco to hold the 2nd Regional Renewable Energy Permitting and Installation Symposium.

In addition to the work championed in San Jose, the Department of Energy funds The Solar America Board for Codes and Standards (Solar ABCs) - [www.solarabcs.org](http://www.solarabcs.org) – to develop best practices for streamlining solar permitting. This collaboration of experts is working to provide coordinated recommendations to codes- and standards-making bodies for both existing and new solar technologies. The Board published a report by Brooks Engineering in October 2009 titled *Expedited Permit Process for PV Systems*, which outlines a standardized process for review of small-scale PV systems by local permitting officials.

It is information from professional organizations like Solar ABCs as well as ongoing education from cities like San Jose that will continue to help other cities across the U.S. improve their permitting processes and pave the way to broader adoption of solar energy in the weeks, months and years ahead.

For more information on the work done in San Jose or regarding best practices in streamlining solar permitting, please contact Jim Licko, GroundFloor Media, and he can connect you with the following individuals for interviews:

Hannah Muller or Charlie Hemmeline, U.S. Department of Energy, Solar America Cities  
Jessie Denver, City of San Jose's Solar Program Coordinator  
Doug Payne, Acting Executive Director, SolarTech  
Larry Sherwood, Solar America Board for Codes and Standards  
Bill Brooks, Creator of Training for Code Officials with Brooks Engineering

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